DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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ADDRESS BY THE HONORABLE GEORGE F. KENNAN, COUNSELOR, DEPARTMENT OF STATE, AT A MEETING OF THE INSTITUTE ON UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY, SPONSORED BY THE FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION OF MILWAUKEE, THE MILWAUKEE VOCATIONAL AND ADULT SCHOOLS, AND THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN EXTENSION DIVISION AT THE MILWAUKEE VOCATIONAL AND ADULT SCHOOL, MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN, AT 8:00 P.M., C.D.T. (9:00 P.M., E.D.T.), FRIDAY, MAY 5, 1950

Current Problems in the Conduct of Foreign Policy

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I do not need to tell you that for me personally it has a special meaning to be speaking here this evening to people of this city and this state. It was just a hundred years ago that my family came to Wisconsin. My great-grandfather, my grandfather and my father all rated as old settlers of the State. My boyhood was spent here. Whenever I come here and talk about international problems I have the feeling of rendering an accounting to people who have a right to expect such an accounting from me and whose understanding of that accounting is somehow basic to the success of what we are trying to do.

On many occasions during these past four years that I have been in Washington, I have travelled to other cities of the country -- Milwaukee included -- to talk to people about what has been going on in world affairs and to explain to them the bases of our policies.

On those occasions, I have never failed to be asked dozens of interested questions -- questions which revealed a keen curiosity about international affairs, and a desire on the part of people to hear the facts and to make their own independent judgments about our foreign policy problems.

People didn't always agree, by any means, with what we were doing in Washington, and with our reasons for doing it, and these doubts came out in their questions. But they always credited us, it seemed to me, with integrity, with good will, with a sincere desire to serve the interests of the country as we perceived those interests. And on that basis we were always able to discuss these things as equals -- as normal, decent Americans, with a common concern -- and a disinterested concern -- for the country's welfare. We could direct our discussion not to the problems of the past, but to the problems of the present and the future.

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It is just that which I had hoped to be able to do today. The problems are still there. They are as bitter, as complicated as ever.

And yet, I do not feel, this time, that we can proceed in quite this way. Things have occurred in recent weeks which I am afraid have affected the confidence that I might have otherwise expected from many of you. There is no use just ignoring these things. In one way or another, they are going to have to be talked out; because if they are not talked out they are going to confuse us and make us uncertain of ourselves, and it is not going to be possible for us to think effectively and usefully about our real problems.

I refer, of course, to the charges which have been flying about in recent weeks concerning the Department of State, the people in it, the motives of their conduct, and the relation of all that to our foreign policy.

A friend of mine who knows a good deal about the American people and their reactions said something to me the other day which helped me personally to orient myself in this situation which, I ask you to believe, has not been an easy one for any of us in the Department of State, whether or not we have been personally attacked. This friend said, "You may be sure that these charges would not have proved so disturbing to people out around the country if there were not in their minds some great doubts and questions about American foreign policy which have not yet been answered to their satisfaction. Things have not gone in accordance with their hopes or their expectations, and they want to know the reasons why. If it has not been because the State Department has been full of communists, then they want to know what the real reason is."

I am sure that there is a great deal in this. I think there are many people today who are bewildered about the reasons for the gravity and bitterness of our foreign policy problems in this post-war period, and who wonder how things suddenly got that way and whose fault it is. Perhaps there are a few facts about the relationship between past events and present events which would help them.

It seems to me that in the field of foreign affairs there is generally a great time lag -- as much as five or ten years on the average -- between cause and effect in major developments. This is something that few people in this country are aware of. Their unawareness expresses itself in a demand for quick results, where such results often simply cannot be obtained. It also expresses itself in a tendency to lay the blame or credit for current developments on people who happen to bear public responsibility at the moment, even though the real causes of these developments may go much deeper in time and in complexity.

I suppose I have been obliged to think as much professionally about the origins of our position in this post-war world as anyone. I believe that some of our difficulties in understanding this situation result from misunderstandings which existed even prior to the last war.

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It seems to me that in the 30's we were, as a nation, not sufficiently aware of the role which power was coming to play in this world of ours, and particularly in the minds of three extremely vigorous and important peoples, all of whom were discontented in one way or another with their own cut from the settlement of World War I. These peoples were of course the Germans, the Russians and the Japanese.

During the decade preceding our participation in the second World War, that is from 1931-1941, it was plain that these countries were all in the hands of governments which would have no respect for liberal principles or ethical restraints in their conduct and would be motivated primarily by power considerations. It was also evident that these three countries in combination possessed, or would soon possess, a military potential clearly overshadowing anything that could be mobilized elsewhere on the Asiatic and European continents. It was evident that if the western world were therefore to have any hope of coping with them in a future war, this would lie in the possibility--which eventually came true--that they would be divided against themselves. In other words, by the latter part of the '30's the preponderance of world power was already against ourselves and our friends and it could be reasonably predicted that if our sort of world were to survive it would be only by virtue of the rifts among the totalitarian powers, not because we and our friends were strong enough to oppose all of them together and all at once.

It was for this reason that when war came to us, we were confronted with a sad, and perhaps for many of us humiliating, fact: namely, that it was only with the help of one totalitarian regime, still saturated with hatred for us and determined to encompass our downfall, that we could defeat those other totalitarian powers which had brought themselves into a state of hostility with us. And many of us were inclined to forget that the single totalitarian state which was on our side was there unwillingly, chagrined and embittered to find itself in our company. It was there not by its own choice. It was there because it had made the mistake of relying on an agreement with Hitler and because Hitler had made the even greater mistake of betraying that agreement and turning his sword to the east. Instead of recognizing this unhappy state of fact, and drawing from it the bitter lessons which it held for us, we consoled ourselves with the delusion that Moscow would change: that the war-time association with us would produce some basic alteration in the nature of a regime whose commitment to totalitarianism was really far more than just a state of mind.

Holding this delusion--not only holding it, but nursing it with a sort of desperation--and assuring ourselves that unless it came true peace was impossible, we did not realize how profound and fateful a change would be made in the world picture when, with the war fought to the finish of "unconditional surrender", two of these totalitarian states would be laid prostrate and disarmed while the third would be left in possession of great areas of Europe and Asia. We did not fully realize that this would create a situation in which it would be a hard and dangerous and wearisome task to restore life on these continents except with Russia's consent and on Russia's terms.

This was a serious misunderstanding we were wandering into. For the power of the free world had not really been enhanced during the war. On the contrary, the German and Japanese occupation of other countries had dealt great, if temporary, blows in many instances to their capabilities for the independent re-assertion of their national power. The experience of totalitarian occupation

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had not only left people everywhere with a national hatred of those who had occupied them; it had also left another and more fateful imprint. This was a widespread doubt about the principles of that liberal non-totalitarian world which had failed to save them from the catastrophe of occupation, and had liberated them only after years of suffering and degradation and, in some instances, of tragic human losses.

I am not saying that the war could or should have ended differently than it did. Hindsight is too easy; and we are not helped, in our present bitter problems, by the boastful claims of "I told you so" even in those rare instances where they might have some justification. I am saying that the shape of this post-war world, with all its dangers and its insecurity and its lack of easy solutions, was largely cut out for us by the course of military events during the recent war, when we were very little aware of that fact. And I would point out that the policies by which those military events were determined were ones which found the concurrence and approval of the overwhelming majority of our people including, I think, certainly of most of us who are here in this room tonight. Let us be fair, then, and recognize that in this great turning in human affairs which has led to our problems of today we are dealing with something for which we all have a share of responsibility. And let us therefore look for its causes not in the possible deficiencies of a few contemporary figures, but rather in the great tragic sweep of the events of our time.

This was not the only fateful source of misunderstanding about our present problems. There is another which I would like to mention. This relates to China and the Far East. There has been no sector of our policy which has been the cause of so much criticism as this.

I believe that I understand the state of mind which lies behind this criticism. It is roughly this: China has fallen to the Communists. That is a reversal to the cause of world peace and stability. Therefore, our policy must have been wrong. Therefore there must have been something wrong in the State Department.

That all sounds plausible enough; and it would be--if China were a sort of province of the United States and if the State Department ran it and if it were the State Department which had decided that the Communist Party should be the faction which would have the best morale and discipline and pack the strongest political punch and win the civil war in China.

But suppose none of this were so. Suppose that our representatives had warned the Chinese Government earnestly and repeatedly of the probable consequences of the course on which it had embarked; suppose that when these warnings were ignored, there was nothing more that our Government could really do to influence or alter the basic course of events in China; suppose that the troubles of the Chinese Government were inherent within itself; suppose that it wasn't in the first instance lack of money or arms or anything this country could give which stood between the Chinese Government and the accomplishment of its purposes in China; suppose we were given the impression that the reason that government wanted aid from us and paid people in this country to lobby for that aid was not so much that it really wanted to overcome its weaknesses, but in order that it might more easily avoid having to face up to them, not so much that it wanted to increase its efforts, but rather because it wanted to involve us to the point where we would take over the major burden of the responsibility and it could itself relax

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and sit back; how would things look then?

These happen to have been the realities, and they can be very easily proven from the published documents.

What would people have had the State Department do in the light of this situation of fact? Would they have had us beat our breasts and recommend United States intervention in China to prove that we were good anti-communists? I wonder how many of you realize what that really means. I can conceive of no more ghastly and fateful mistake, and nothing more calculated to confuse the issues in this world today than for us to go into another great country and try to uphold by force of our own blood and treasures a regime which had clearly lost the confidence of its own people. Nothing could have pleased our enemies more. Yet this is precisely what this country would have been led into by further involvement along the lines of military aid and advice; and I look back with pride on the fact that people in our Government, in the State Department and elsewhere, had the good sense and the courage to resist the flamboyant and emotional appeals for action in this direction. Had our Government been carried away by these pressures, many of which had their origins in the interests and activities of a foreign government, I am confident that today the whole struggle against world communism in both Europe and Asia would have been hopelessly fouled up and compromised.

As it is, we have lost a battle, and yielded what appeared to be a position. I have never believed that it was a sound position, or a defensible one. What has happened in China is bad, and we have no reason to feel smug about it. But I would point out that with the departure of the last party of American officials from Tientsin last Sunday we have gotten rid of our last official entanglement in that unhappy area. We are now on the road to a relationship with China which will be expressive of our high regard for the Chinese people but unencumbered by past involvements and illusions. Our slate is pretty well clean; and I am afraid it had to become clean, at whatever cost, before we could even make a beginning on a constructive and effective policy toward that country.

Now if these things are so, why is it that we have had so much misunderstanding and so much bitterness in this country about this course of events? I am sure that the answer to that question lies to a large extent in the shallowness and over-simplification of our understanding of what has been happening in China.

It is true that there are not many people among us who are qualified to estimate in its entirety what has really been taking place in these last 40 or 50 years in the political and psychological evolution of the Chinese people. I know that I am not.

But one thing, I think, is evident: prior to this recent war many of us had a tendency to mis-estimate the nature and feelings of the peoples of Asia and of China in particular--to sentimentalize those people, sometimes to patronize them, to view them too much as being like ourselves, to take for granted their political reactions rather than trying to understand them, and above all to forget the unfavorable aspects in which the white man had so often revealed himself to them in the relatively recent past. This being the case, I am sure that we did not analyze very effectively what was happening in Chinese political life during recent decades. I

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am sure we were oblivious to signs and portents which should have put us on our guard as to the shallowness of our understanding. I am sure that during the early years of the war, while the Japanese were in occupation of large portions of China there were phenomena clearly visible which should have been recognized by us as raising serious doubt whether the Chinese Government would be able to consolidate its power in the Japanese occupied areas if and when the Japanese were to leave. This was particularly clear in the case of Manchuria, where the National Government of China had never had any appreciable authority in recent decades.

Had we realized this, we would not have deluded ourselves, as I think many of us did, into the hope that the defeat of Japan and the evacuation of Japanese forces from China would mean a "united, free, and democratic China" as these terms were understood in our country.

Now you may say: "If the situation in China was so black, why were we not told this earlier?" The answer is: these things were said, many times over, as clearly as they could be said by our Government without running the risk of misinterpretation and direct damage to the Chinese Government. Remember that we could not talk about these things to our own people without being overheard in China, and too much emphasis on the disturbing conclusions which had to be drawn would itself doubtless have hastened the disintegration of the power of the Chinese Government. I ask you to note this because it raises a question of principle as to the extent to which our Government can interpret its own policies to the people in a situation where its interpretations not only describe the course of events but in part determine it. Secondly, we in Washington were already under such strident and bitter attack from protagonists of the Chinese Government that if we stressed this point too much we were sure to be accused by them of defeatism and charged with the responsibility for that very trend of events in China which we were being forced to view as inevitable. In these circumstances, some of us felt that the risks of popular misunderstanding in this country might be even greater if we tried to emphasize to the public the lesson of the reports coming in from China than they would be if people were permitted to make their own judgment on the basis of these reports. Perhaps this course was wrong; however that may be, its motives were serious and worthy ones. Again, I would point the moral. If the atmosphere of public discussion is to be too harsh, too intolerant, too abusive, this is going to decrease rather than to increase the possibilities for a frank and helpful exposition of Government policy to the public at large.

Now it was with the misapprehensions I have spoken about that large numbers of our people entered the post-hostilities era. Since then, things have progressed in ways that have now led quite naturally to deep questions in many people's minds. Recent events, namely this final collapse of the power of the Chinese Government on the mainland of China, and the demonstration of a Soviet atomic capability, have given to many people the impression that we are losing what they call the cold war; and to others, who may not see things quite that blackly, these events have brought doubts and questions as to whether our policies are adequate, whether we have really thought things through, and how, if present policies are continued, these things are going to end.

I cannot attempt to answer those questions in detail within the scope of this talk. In my own opinion the dangers and

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difficulties that confront the western world from without, as distinct from those that confront it from within, are not appreciably greater today than they have been at any time since the termination of hostilities, and there is no reason that they need be fatal to our cause. Things have gone relatively well, by and large, in Europe, and relatively badly in Asia. But neither in Europe nor in Asia has there been any finality about any of these events. The situation in both places is still fluid, and highly subject to rapid change in our favor or our disfavor. I believe that the basic lines of the policy which we have pursued in these past three years have been pretty well prescribed for us by the limits of what was possible and practicable, and that they could not have been much different than they were without putting us worse off today than we actually are.

Now I am not going to tell you that we have made no mistakes or that we have been everything that we should be. I am not going to tell you there has been no problem of security, that there have been no communists or communist agents in the Government, although I think that is something the significance of which has been overrated in relation to our other problems.

What I want to urge of you this evening is only this: that you join me in recognizing the profundity of the foreign policy problems with which we are faced today; that you recognize the depth in time and space of the origins of those problems; and that you do not be misled into the easy conclusion that the dangers and challenges and dilemmas of our world situation are the product of the mistakes or the ill will of any individuals who bear responsibility at this moment for the conduct of foreign affairs.

I urge this on you for two reasons. I urge it first for the sake of the individuals concerned. I believe that I can properly speak here without a personal interest. I am not one of those who have been attacked. And I am leaving the Government for a long time in the near future.

I beg you to believe that the responsibilities borne by these men who have to conduct foreign affairs in this country are neither light nor easy, and that the sort of service which they are rendering to the Government has few personal compensations. We are not rich, strange as it may seem to some of you, in men both qualified and available to take these positions. The strains under which our leading officials work leave them a very slender margin of physical and spiritual energy to absorb abuse and derision from the people for whom they conceive themselves to be working. I must tell you that the atmosphere of public life in Washington does not have to deteriorate much further to produce a situation in which very few of our more quiet and sensitive and gifted people will be able to continue in government.

And I view this situation with deep alarm. I have told you that I am not a pessimist about the cold war. But this is on the assumption that we can mobilize the best we have in human nature in this country to help us fight it and that we can give to those people the enthusiasm and the confidence and the stimulus which comes from knowing that their efforts are appreciated and supported. If we cannot do that, I can give you no promising assurances. The margin of safety with which our country moves in the world today is not great enough to permit us to be reckless and wasteful with the talents and the idealism of those people we depend on for the generalship of our peacetime battles.

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The first reason, therefore, that I ask you not to make these men the scapegoats of whatever dissatisfaction and bewilderment you may feel concerning our international position is that it is not fair to them. The second reason that I urge this on you is that it is not fair to yourselves and the great body of citizenry of which you are a part.

If you permit yourselves to attribute to contemporary causes which are shallow and fleeting and of dubious substance, developments which are in reality part of the cumulative effect of the behavior of whole peoples and groups of peoples in the past, you will be abusing your clarity of insight into the realities of this world. In the past, our fortunate geographic position and our immense resources have enabled us to take in our stride great and widespread errors of judgment--errors not just on the part of our leaders but errors on the part of all of us together. We have been able to afford in many instances to believe in that which was pleasant rather than in that which was real. Today we can no longer afford this luxury. If our system of government is to continue to rest on the basis of popular understanding and popular will, then we must learn as a nation to face unflinchingly the lessons of experience, to recognize the true causes of our difficulties, to free ourselves from a morbid introspection and to turn our minds in unity and confidence to the objective problems that lie before us.

Perhaps only someone who has lived for many years in totalitarian countries can feel as strongly as I do how vitally important it is to us to preserve the spirit of tolerance and liberality in our relations with each other and the readiness to give the other fellow the benefit of the doubt, where doubt exists. These things lie at the heart of our civilization. They are essential to free inquiry, to the scientific method as we know it, and to our own special form of creativeness. But they are also essential to the preservation of our national identity and to our entire claim to world leadership. If our enemies without can force us to abandon the spirit of tolerance by frightening us with their agents inside our country, then they will have bypassed the Maginot line of our society, they will have seized its citadels from within and we on the firing line will have been left with nothing to defend.

Believe me, there is something more involved here than just the guilt or innocence, the folly or the wisdom, of any of us who today bear the responsibility for the formulation of United States foreign policy. I do not deny that those things are at issue, too; and I am aware of the heavy connotations of that fact. But there is something greater still that is also at stake: and that is the question as to whether a country, as Lincoln expressed it, "so conceived and so dedicated" as our own, can meet the responsibilities of national maturity in a world bewildered by its own past violence and haunted by the shadows of its own disunity.

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